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10th January 2012

HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ALL MY DEAR FRIENDS AND RELATIVES (now, alas, mostly deceased) and for whom I really haven't got time to write a personal letter. but who I know like to be brought up to date and for all the blanks to be filled in.

Well, what a year it's been, with many 'ups' and 'downs', but fortunately more 'ups' than 'downs'! On the downside, in February my boiler erupted, and then I had great trouble in March with my lavatory seat, which came unscrewed, and a spill of Cocopops on my carpet. a particular favourite of mine (the Cocopops, not the carpet!). On the 'Top-of-the-Ups' side, however, I have just returned from a delightful Christmas spent with my dear God-daughter, Nikki, her lovely husband David (Mozart-lover and former Rugby player), and their two charming children (both now, of course, grown-up) Harry and Bethan. They really are the nicest, most generous family and it was such a pleasure to be in their company devouring as much food and drink as I could cram in in the time.

I began my long journey to their stylish home in deepest Wales [redacted], Wales, in case you're passing - turn left at Carmarthen Castle, site of the Prince of Wales Investigation, by train (1st Class, naturellement!) from Paddington Station London at 10,45 hrs. on 23rd December in the delightful company of daughter Bethan who is studying men's fashion design at Kingston College of Art (Kingston) and is clearly a budding Tracey Eminem or Jean Muir! (I don't know whether or not I ever told you, but Jean Muir once cooked dinner for me and fixed me up with a blind date - which was an absolute disaster! But that's another story.)

The train was a long one and we were in Coach G (seats 12 & 13F). Unfortunately we were not blessed with good weather and poor visibility prevented us from taking in the beauties of the Swindon and Didcot countryside. I also missed Reading Gaol which is normally visible from the railway, and where Oscar Wilde was, of course incarcerated. Luckily I live quite near Oscar's London home in Tite Street, which kind of compensates me for that deprivation.

We were met on arrival at Swansea Station by Nikki who then drove us to their lovely extended bungalow, calling first, en route, at Carmarthen where Nikki and I partook of a tea and pastry at S&M - sorry, M&S! I

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always get those muddled up! - whilst Bethan went for a hair appointment. Then, on to Newcastle Emlyn where the Rabjohns had certainly 'kept-a-welcome-in-the-hillside'! (as the well-known Welsh hymn goes) which couldn't have been warmer! David immediately wrenched himself away from his "Cosi fan Tutte (I personally prefer "Le Nozzle di Figaro") and their lovely old dog "Bert" fell immediately for my irresistible, animal magnetism and proceeded to 'hump' me with abandon. I was very flattered!

Poor Harry was sadly working, so we would not be seeing him and his partner, Abe, until Xmas Day dinner. He is studying hotel and catering management and an assuredly 'cordon-bleu', future Michelin-Tyre holder, I have no doubt.

Whilst we're on the subject of honours and awards, I must admit I was a bit peeved that, yet again, I had been overlooked in the Queen's New Year's Honours List. I have, of course, never expected anything too grand, but it is a bit galling when one of my local friends, Beryl Curran, received an MBE for 25 years service as a school dinner-lady. She and her deceased bus-conductor husband were once drinking pals in my neighbourhood-local pub days (when he was alive of course, that is - his name was Phil). Not that I have anything against Beryl per se. They always paid their corner, and so on, but after my long-time charitable services to the Chelsea Missions to Seamen including a period of 19 months as acting-deputy secretary to its Emergency Balaclava Knitting Circle in 1951, I do feel somewhat slighted. Her Madge had been most prompt in returning my spectacles several years ago, after I had left them by the offertory-box in Sandringham Church during a visit to the House, I had assumed that this indicated in a tiny way that I was held in some sort of esteem, however lowly. But it was not to be. Maybe I'll fare better in the forthcoming Diamond Jubilee Olympics Honours - if I'm still around; and if lucky enough to be on the receiving end of all the fuss and cosseting I've received from my Goddaughter and her family, I most certainly will be!

And that, vert neatly, brings me on to health matters. I try not to dwell too much on these, because old people can so easily bore everyone silly with their aches and pains recitals. I prefer to play these down wherever possible and simply count my blessings. Suffice it to say here that, apart from my angina, hypertension, osteo-arthritis, diabetes, impaired hearing, cataracts, prostate, ungar decompression, podiatry problems, dental decline, sciatica, gout, migraines, groin strains, indigestion, tourettes disease, incontinence and excessive farting, I'm in pretty good shape! *I trust I find you likewise in such similar condition.

My membership of the 1951 Emergency Balaclava Knitting Circle I mentioned earlier, has come in very useful this year because, against my better judgement, I have been persuaded to be a member of the London Olympics Synchronised Knitting Team. We are at present in strict training for this highly competitive event (Afghanistan has a particularly strong team this time) and, although we are not expecting a place on the podium, we have some really complicated Busby-Berkeley cross-needles routines with a spectacular Patons & Baldwins finish.

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During the year I made a number of visits to Waitrose where, with the backing of the Manager, Mr. Corney, we managed to get Ritz Crackers reinstated to the shelves. We were less fortunate with Black Pudding and large (mixed) nuts.

I felt a bit guilty this past year for rather neglecting the garden, but then I remembered I hadn't got a garden. I might, however, branch out this Spring and invest in a window-box. This will be a somewhat risky enterprise for me, as my only previous horticultural experience is with plastic plant-life. I know they say a leopard never changes his stripes, but I might just do so to prove them wrong! I've always liked a challenge.

I was not able to get to as many West-End shows last year as I would have liked, but did manage to catch "Billy Elliot", "The Vagina Monologues" and "Much Ado About Nothing". I also had two highly enjoyable theatre evenings with Nikki at "Betty Blue Eyes" at the Novello and "Blithe Spirit" at the Lyric. Our evening at the Novello was very nearly ruined, however, only minutes before 'curtain-up' by some drunken yob falling down the stairs and cracking his head on the marble steps. "Serve him bloody right", I said. "The theatre is no place for riff-raff alcoholics". I had also hoped, at last, to make Wagner's "Ring" main cycle, but decided my bladder would not be up to 18 hours in the Covent Garden stalls! I settled instead for "We Will Rock You" at the Dominion. Bidet's "Carmen" was also on my 'must see' list, as well as Britten's "The Stern of the Crew", but these must now be put on the 'back-burner'. A Mozart Quartets concert recital at the Wigmore Hall was (sorry David!) not really to my taste, but there is a rather nice sandwich bar in the basement. The Season was, however, rescued for me by two wonderful visits to the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall, each time preceded by an 'up-market' dinner in their prestigious Coda Restaurant (one of 'Prue's!) with my oldest friend (we met on tricycles when we were five years old), former Charterhouse music teacher, Geoffrey. Amongst our 'treats' were Rimsky-corsica's "Sheherazade", Peter Mandelson's Overture to "The Midsummer Night's Dream" and Gershwin's "Porgy and Beth".

There's so much more to tell you which I know you'll be dying to hear, but, for the moment I hope you will forgive me for the brevity of this note - and also for its duplicated nature. But don't worry. I'll send you more as soon as I've had a moment or two to reflect^{on} the great hedonistic pleasures I have been so fortunate to enjoy thanks to the huge kindnesses of the Rabjohns - one and all! - and also had time to change my typewriter ribbon!

God bless you, dear friends, and all who sail in you, and may all our troubles be little ones in 2012 - especially our energy bills!

Happy New Year, and with much love as always,

Yours ever,

P.S. * I omitted haemorrhoids - my apologies.